

Monument Mountain offers sweeping views, folklore

By Adam Gorlick, Associated Press

GREAT BARRINGTON, Mass. — It has inspired poetry and literature, folk tales and local legends. But Monument Mountain — known as the site of an important literary meeting between Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne — has also become one of the Berkshires' top hiking destinations. The view from the top on a clear, sunny, autumn day makes it easy to see why.



Berkshire view: A short hike at Monument Mountain Reservation in Great Barrington, Mass., is full of breathtaking scenery.

Nancy Palmieri, AP

Two trails stretch up either side of the mountain and join at the top, forming a looping grand tour through towering pines, blueberry bushes and quartz outcroppings. A narrow stream trickles alongside a portion of Hickey Trail, which climbs along the mountain's east side. The stream reaches a rocky ledge and pours over the slab to form a curtain of water about 10 feet tall. Behind the mini-waterfall, a shallow cave offers a sheltered seat for weary walkers or hikers looking for even more solitude than the woods provide.

At about 1,700 feet, the peak overlooks the center of Great Barrington, and a turn to the west or north yields nothing but rolling hills, with the greens of summer giving way to golds and reds this time of year.

Just south of the peak is a lookout with an unobstructed view to Devil's Pulpit, a towering pillar of rock that stands in front of the mountain's face.

"The beauty of the property is that within an hour, you can be at one of the best views in Berkshire County," said Steve McMahon, western regional director for the Trustees of Reservations, a land preservation organization that's maintained the 500-acre site since 1899.

According to the legend that gave Monument Mountain its name, a heartbroken Indian forbidden to marry her cousin climbed to a ledge and jumped off the mountain. Her family is said to have buried her on the mountain, marking her grave with a stone monument.

IF YOU GO ...

• **How to get there:** Located on the southbound side of Route 7 in Great Barrington. Trailheads are just past the parking lot. No admission fee. Open daily.

3239.

•**Special event:** The annual trek up the mountain commemorating the famous literary picnic will be held on Aug. 7, 2005; for details, contact Arrowhead, which was Herman Melville's home, located in Pittsfield; www.mobydick.org or (413) 442-1793.

"I can take you to a rock pile, but I'm not going to say there's an Indian maiden buried underneath it," McMahon said. "That's folklore."

The tale was chronicled in an 1824 poem by William Cullen Bryant, who encourages readers of his "Monument Mountain" to "look upon the green and rolling forest-tops, and down into the secrets of the glens, and streams that with their bordering thickets

strive to hide their windings."

In August of 1850, Melville, who lived in nearby Pittsfield and was working on "Moby Dick," was invited to meet Hawthorne, who lived in Lenox and had just published "The Scarlet Letter." The two had a picnic on the mountain, where they discussed the future of American literature. Joining them was author and physician Oliver Wendell Holmes. To prepare for the outing, Holmes emptied the tools of his trade from his doctor's bag and replaced them with ice and a bottle of champagne.

After hiking up the mountain and downing the bottle at the peak, "they got themselves happy enough, and Melville decided to climb out on a dangerous cliff to demonstrate how they unfurl sails on a whaling ship," said Gordon Hyatt, who organizes an annual trek up the mountain to re-enact the storied picnic.

Melville — who was unharmed by his escapade — was so inspired by the meeting that he spent another year working on "Moby Dick," which was already two-thirds finished. Melville dedicated the book to Hawthorne.

"It certainly was the most famous and important literary picnic in American history," Hyatt said.

Another mountain in the area also figured into "Moby Dick." The snowcapped peak of Mount Greylock, about 40 miles north of Monument Mountain, is said to have resembled a great white whale in the view from the writer's studio in Pittsfield.

But literary associations and folklore are not the main draw for hikers looking for a quick escape into the woods.

"It's a great hike," said Dave Horrigan, 41, of Seattle, on his way down from the mountain top. "I didn't have a lot of time for a hike today. This was the perfect thing to do."